TOK ESSAY-2013

**Prescribed title**: Can we know when to trust our emotions in the pursuit of knowledge? Consider History and one other area of knowledge.

Humans have evolved for millions of years. We share the same physical characteristics but it is what we feel or believe that makes us different and affects our courses of action or behavioral tactics. Head over heart is a common saying used to express the need to think logically without the consideration of one’s feelings. In the pursuit of knowledge a factor of extreme importance is the question “how?” This question leads to a series of answers that enable the person asking them to gain a better understanding of what they desired to know. The prescribed question poses another important query, “when?” which in context is the exact time an individual is capable of determining to use their emotions or deciding when it is best not to let them affect the situation at hand. It could be assumed that the ultimate human weakness is the ability to feel or the possession of a range of emotions. The threat we face is the lack of principle or capability to determine when exactly to turn off our emotions in order to asses a situation when needed. Simply put, we do not know when to draw the line and assume an objective stance. My aim is to use history and ethics to assess this matter.

A headline is captivating which of course is the goal of both writer and editor. The job description of journalists extends further than reporting the most recent news. They search and examine every detail when covering a story. They look for clues in the emotions of the people they are interviewing; using what they gather to enhance a story and make it more interesting for the reader. Most of what is quoted from an individual is edited to make a bland statement seem more appealing. The reliability of newspapers and news programs is questionable and may be dependent on who reports the incident. In essence it is influenced by the owner of the particular network program and their political affiliation. “Idi Amin, a brutal dictator of Uganda, is dead at 80”, was the headline of a New York Times Magazine. How a person would have reacted to this depends on their political, cultural or ethical beliefs, and with that their emotional links .A person in Uganda with first-hand experience with the ruling of Amin would have felt differently than a person in Europe with only the knowledge gained from news reports which is basically second hand knowledge. Certain news reports tend to be biased and such influences the views of the people watching it. A viewer with no emotional attachment to Idi Amin would feel differently as opposed to a viewer with strong emotional links or personal involvement with the leader and the manner of his reign. A person with a negative attitude towards Amin gained from watching and reading about him would experience relief at the thought that a man who supposedly tortured his people had died. So, whilst in the pursuit of knowledge an indifferent individual would obtain greater and more reliable knowledge than one who is emotionally obscured.

My first encounter with Idi Amin was from the film adaptation of the dictator’s reign in Uganda, “The Last King of Scotland”. Prior to this I had never heard about a leader in Africa with such harsh traits. My opinions were based entirely on the movie I had just watched. I had no knowledge of the reasons for Amin’s courses of action and lacked the ability to understand the leader and what was expected of him at the time. In hindsight, it seemed that the movie had some factual details about Uganda at the time but was extremely biased from the obviously grotesque depiction of the leader. The knowledge I gained about this leader was initially formed by watching “The Last King Scotland” and after that any knowledge I gathered from articles or obituaries were tainted by my extreme distaste of the Ugandan leader. I was disgusted by his actions, manner of ruling his people and felt saddened at the thousands of innocent lives lost during his rule. My emotions and nationality as a Malawian influenced every new piece of knowledge of the past that I gathered about this man. As an African woman the nature of his reign and mass killings felt close to home and the grief that the people felt was easily identifiable to me. I empathized more than what I assume an individual from a different continent would. According to the James -Lange theory emotion, “when you empathize with someone you take on the physical symptoms-the mood”. So my reaction towards the leader and his actions was a reflection of what the people of Uganda felt and their attitude towards their situation. There were numerous views on the matter of Idi Amin’s death, each reflecting the African people’s opinions in relation to their emotions on whether Amin was to be accorded a state burial. These are two examples of the opinions of Africans on the nature of Amin’s death. “He deserves to be returned as a Ugandan. He should not be given a state burial”2and “His body should be brought back because he was a president. After all these years, people should be able to forgive him. Why not? Government should accord him a state burial.”3 These two quotes show that people even within Africa had varying degrees of concern or distaste towards the leader. Some even supported his eviction of the Indians and considered it beneficial. Their opinions were an evident manifestation of how they felt about this man. However it is not precise to assume that people from different parts of the world with various cultures did not care about the devastating genocide in Uganda. They may have kept their emotions in check and not have been so outwardly oppositional towards this man. They may have found a way to be subjectively objective thus refraining from allowing their emotions to override their gain in knowledge.

However, factual data proved that Idi Amin was loved by the same people he supposedly mistreated. During his time of death, he was surrounded by friends and family proving that he was in fact loved. If in the pursuit of knowledge we as individuals only considered any knowledge held at present to be correct and are reluctant to accept new pieces of information then that knowledge we already possess could lack clarity and be falsified.

The controversial theory of evolution proposed by Charles Darwin has sparked numerous debates and questioned religious beliefs. It is an example of a barrier that separates the views of human beings. Darwin introduced this theory with key examples and factual data. The origin of species is one of the strongest claims Darwin has in his theory. Those bound by religious beliefs and principles are the most averse to the idea that humankind evolved from primitive creatures. The concepts and pillars of their religion are strong enough principles for them to completely dismiss Darwin’s theory. The creationists are the strongest opponents of Darwin’s theory of evolution, which is largely discussed in biology. In the pursuit of knowledge, the data and theoretical evidence about the existence of humankind introduced by Darwin would not be fully acknowledged by those who were taught to defy such views by their religion. However for Darwin’s theory to have such a profound impact on the study of civilization as well as the human anatomy and still be of immense importance to biological study in the natural sciences it had to have interested a large percentage of individuals who, in the pursuit ok knowledge, set aside what they had been taught to believe and their emotions to acept entirely different concepts. Those individuals who made the theory of evolution a topic of importance have defied the emotional links religious people or creationists may have that prevent them for gaining further knowledge.

Ethics is defined as a system of moral principles that affect how a person behaves. Moral principles are strongly linked to emotional beliefs derived from both the culture and community of an individual. Using ethics as an area of knowledge and the diversity argument which is supportive of moral relativism, the actions or manner of thinking is the platform that forms that particular individual’s ethical views. I have been raised in a community with strict and concrete morals. What I have been taught to consider wrong or right is different to what my peers may have learnt from their community. It would be wrong to condemn their beliefs and consider them as fallible. Comparing cultures in the pursuit of knowledge would be more effective if done by a person who does not belong to any one culture. This person’s knowledge, fair judgment and assessment would not be restricted by their emotions or allegiance to any of the cultures; thus enabling them to gather as much unbiased knowledge from each culture easily. Nevertheless, how would it be possible for a person outside those two cultures to fairly compare them without fully understanding each having not been formerly educated by the people of those cultures? Third culture kids are increasingly popular in this century. There is always some aspect of more than one culture that an individual possesses, so it isn’t reliable for an individual to be completely unbiased with their emotions when assessing those cultures and gaining knowledge from them.

In order to overcome the threat of not knowing when it is appropriate to feel, humans are required to accept information even when it may feel wrong to do so. Only then will they gain the full depth and truth of what it is they learn. The obstacles and inconsistencies they face such as the diversity argument, political preferences or cultural beliefs in relation to their emotions are their most profound barriers which would prevent them knowing when to trust those emotions whilst gaining more knowledge. Time is an important factor to consider when pursuing knowledgeable factors because with time comes the variable elements that may obstruct the gain of wholesome knowledge. To balance feelings and knowledge without bias is the key factor in remaining objective; but what lacks feasibility is the resonating act of subjectivity which is a problematic factor for the pursuit of knowledge without regard to one’s emotions.

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